

# Chemical Dependency in the Family:

## Raising a Healthy Grandchild Against the Odds



One of a series of articles from, "Parenting Grandchildren",  
the AARP Grandparent Information Center newsletter

**Publication No. (ADP) 01-4752**

Resource Center  
State of California  
Alcohol and Drug Programs  
1700 K Street  
First Floor  
Sacramento, CA 95814

(800) 879-2772 (California Only)  
(916) 327-3728  
FAX: (916) 323-1270  
TTY: (916) 445-1942  
Internet: <http://www.adp.ca.gov>  
E-Mail: [ResourceCenter@adp.state.ca.us](mailto:ResourceCenter@adp.state.ca.us)

by Sally Houtman, M.S., L.S.W.

Among the many reasons you as a grandparent may be needed to care for a grandchild is that the parent may be unable to do so as a result of drug or alcohol dependency.

Your challenge is twofold: you are required to balance the added stress of parenting your grandchild as well as the ongoing demands of parenting an adult child who is a substance abuser. You must search for a way to manage both sets of responsibilities without getting crushed in between.

In all likelihood, the parent has been addicted since before the birth of the child. The children only serve to make an already difficult situation that much more complex. The impact of all decisions, actions, conflicts, and disagreements must now be weighed in terms of their potential impact on the well being of a child.

Under such difficult and emotionally conflicting circumstances, you should be aware that there is rarely ever a "win-win" solution to any given problem situation. Addiction is an equal opportunity destroyer, and whenever it's present someone invariably gets hurt. Your role as a grandparent is not to feel responsible for stopping all hurts from happening but to minimize the damage in whatever way possible.

Here are a few general guidelines which may be useful to you:

Make safety your top priority. While you may find your adult child's substance abuse problem difficult to handle, you should know that having a substance abuse problem in itself does not make an individual dangerous. Simply being exposed to a chemically dependent person is not necessarily damaging to a child. The indirect consequences of addiction, which take the forms of unreliability and absenteeism, are more common consequences than any actual direct harm.

However, keep safety first at all times. If the parent is so impaired that his or her judgments cannot be trusted, this is a clear threat to a child's safety. Supervised visits may be the only option for a parent who cannot adequately account for the well being of the child. And remember, a parent who is actively under the influence of any substance is always a safety risk.

Understand that your relationship with the parent will be very different from your grandchild's relationship with the same parent. Your grandchild has not

experienced the ongoing conflicts you have had with the parent. Thus, your grandchild's perceptions of his or her parent will be very different from yours. Therefore, never deny the parent access to the child solely based on your disagreements with the parent. You may rarely agree with the parent's lifestyle or choices, but these alone should not stand in the way of the parent's ability to build a separate (and even loving) relationship with his or her child.

When in doubt, ask yourself, "Of what benefit will my action or decision be to my grandchild?" It is possible that at times you may become so caught up protecting the grandchild from potential harm that your prevailing question has become, "Will my grandchild suffer in some way if I do this or that?" rather than, "How will doing this or that benefit my grandchild?" For example, if you choose not to invite the parent to the child's birthday party because the parent cannot be counted on to show up, the child would suffer.

Your role as a grandparent is not to feel responsible for stopping all hurts from happening but to minimize the damage. Instead of focusing on the potential disappointment if the parent doesn't show, you could ask yourself, "Of what benefit would it be to my grandchild if I did not invite the parent to this party at all?" If there is potential benefit to the child in having the parent present (however unlikely this may be), you may then choose to do the honorable thing and extend the invitation to the parent without telling your grandchild.

For "now you see them, now you don't" parents, planned visits are hurts just waiting to happen. Such hurts may not always be stopped, but their impact might be minimized by allowing the parent's sporadic appearances to be unexpected surprises.

Substance abuse is as complex as it is destructive to all family relationships. Remember, you as a grandparent do not have the power to undo this. Grandparents cannot force a relationship between parent and child that may not be possible, but grandparents must also avoid standing in the way of any beneficial relationship that may be salvaged between a parent and a child.